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AUTHOR Kingston, Albert J., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

A review of studies concerning the reading habits of people 65 years old or older shows that females spend more time reading then do males; senior citizens do not suddenly develop new or extensive reading habits; they prefer light romance with no sex, biographies, westerns, and mysteries; intellectual and physical disabilities are not major factors in the reading habits of older people; and few commercial publishers seem interested in developing and marketing reading materials for this group. Special programs by churches, schools, libraries, or community agencies need to be developed to awaken or to develop interest in reading activities among senior citizens. (JM)

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Reading and The Aged: A Statement of The Problem

Albert J. Kingston, Jr.
The University of Georgia

By the year 1980 approximately 22 million persons in our nation will be 65 years or older. This figure is estimated to represent at least eleven percent of our total population. For the majority of Americans these years will mean less income, more restricted activities and social interactions, increasing health and physical difficulties, more leisure time and probably greater solitariness. It also should be noted that significantly more females than males will be in this group of senior citizens. In a previous paper Kingston (1973) noted that few studies have been conducted of the reading behavior of aged populations. Robinson and Haring (1976) also found little or no research existed.

A number of recently published surveys have shown that many adults do not read extensively. Sharon (1973) surveying the reading habits of 5067 adults 16 years and older noted that "young adults tend to read more than older persons, while the very old spend the least amount of time on reading" (p. 153). Her findings that adults older than 60 averaged 89 minutes of reading daily were not too dissimilar from those of Pheiffer and Davis (1971) who while studying the use of leisure by 241 women and 261 men aged 46-71 found that the average time spent weekly reading books and magazines was 8.3 hours for males

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and 9.0 hours for females. Pheiffer and Davis also found that older persons devoted significantly more time reading than did younger adults. In contrast Sharon found the younger age groups read more than her older subjects. It should be noted however, that most of her 16-18 year olds probably were in school or college and read in connection with their studies.

There seems to be evidence that senior citizens and retirees, despite increased leisure time and less income, do not suddenly develop new or extensive reading habits. (Sharon 1973-74) (Pheiffer and Davis (1971). Rather the reading behavior of the aged reflects and relates closely to previous reading habits, education, and socio-economic status. It also should be noted that among persons aged 60 years and older a significantly higher percent of females than males exists. Regardless of the level of education, reading is more characteristic of females than it is of males in our culture. And aged females also apparently read more than do aged males. Whether this situation merely reflects reading practices at earlier ages or whether additional special factors are involved is not yet known. One might speculate that the aged male, aware of his physical and mental frailities might find it hard to identify with heroines portrayed fictional male protagonist who is athletic, vigorous, sexy, self-assured, and all conquering. Older women probably find it easier to identify with heroines protrayed in their traditional roles. Romani, (1973) a librarian with considerable experience in working with retirees, noted that the aged prefer light romances with no sex, or biographies, western and mysteries. Science fiction and violence

were not liked. Lovelace (1977) working with patients in a nursing home found that her group liked nostalgic stories which provided a forum for reminiscing and discussion about the "good old days".

Intellectual and physical disabilities apparently are not major factors in the lack among older people. Physical and intellectual impairments which prevent reading effects merely a small percent of the aged population (Rabbit 1965). A least two opthamologists have stressed that, contrary to popular opinion, reading does not weaken the eyes. They feel that older people should be encouraged to read as much as they like for as long as they live. (Sloane and Kraut, 1975).

It may be that the failure of more older persons to read more widely is due to society's failure to meet the needs of this large segment of our society. Few commercial publishers seem to be interested in developing and marketing reading materials aimed solely for this group. Similarly few local, state or federal agencies or institutions other than a limited number of public libraries have shown much interest in the reading problems of the aged. (Richards, 1971) The reading specialist particularly, has been remiss, because his major concern traditionally has been and remains the reading of the pre- and school age child or the illiterate adult. Yet, most of us believe fervently that reading can enhance the life of anyone. The program presented today recounts modest effort to enhance the lives of older persons in two different settings by systematic group reading projects. Lovelace (1977) conducted a program with terminally ill people in a nursing home. Wilson (1977) in contrast met with a group of vigorous, healthy men and women in a community retirement cneter. Although these modest programs

resulted in no major breakthroughs all concerned felt that the objectives were achieved and for a brief period the reading sessions did enhance the lives of those involved. Perhaps other special programs developed by churches, schools, or community agencies can serve to awake or develop interest in reading activities in some of the other millions of retirees who often have so much time on their hands.

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